

NINA KATCHADOURIAN

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Via a series of multimedia works featuring her family and other animals, the New York-based artist explores the many ways in which we communicate and miscommunicate with the world

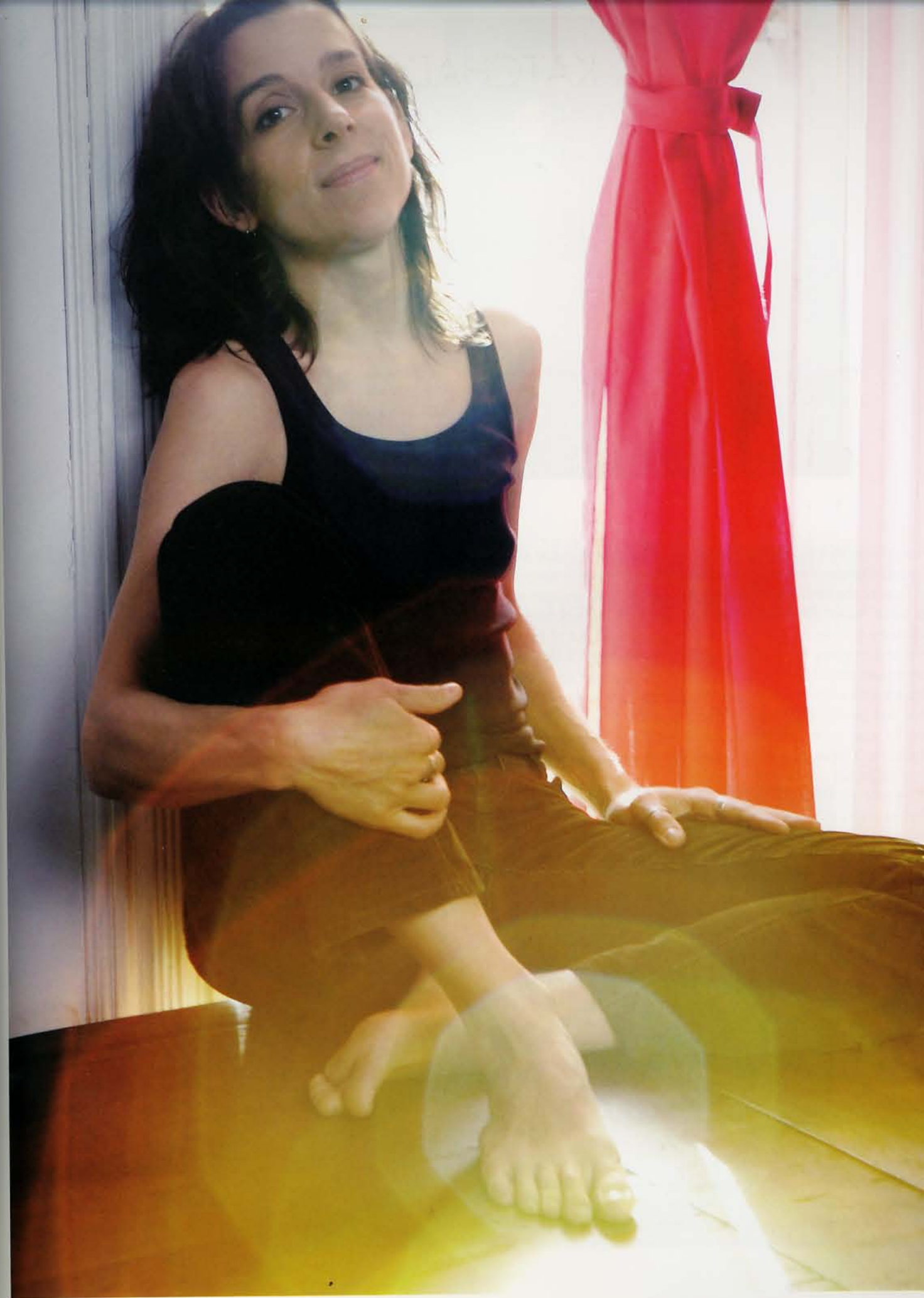
words BRIAN DILLON portrait GLYNNIS McDARIS

NINA KATCHADOURIAN IS SPEAKING FROM HER CAR outside her Brooklyn home, submitting to the familiar New York morning ritual of moving her vehicle before the street-cleaning truck shows up. Alternate side parking: it's a mundane but apt metaphor for the work of an artist who has performed some absurd automotive arrangements in the past – for *CARPARK* (1994), a public art event made in collaboration with Steven Matheson and Mark Tribe at Southwestern College, California, she spent a day organising thousands of cars by colour into 14 separate parking lots. For *Natural Car Alarms* (2002), she equipped three automobiles with alarm systems that blared birdsong. More than this, the unwieldy regime to which her adopted city submits its car owners is somehow akin to the systemic absurdity that exercises her art: Katchadourian is a connoisseur of ingenious but doomed arrangements, senseless hierarchies, crackpot taxonomies.

One such, she notes wryly, is her own family: "We're such a scrambled lot... the fact that my parents ever met is a strange thing." This is no exaggeration, so let me see if I can get this right: Katchadourian's

father, Herant, is a Turkish Armenian, raised in Beirut, where as well as his two native languages he learned to speak Arabic and French. There he met Nina's mother, Stina, who grew up in Finland as part of the Swedish-speaking minority. He learned Swedish, she Armenian; they moved to the United States, and have never lost their (now somewhat palimpsestic) accents, neither of which their daughter has inherited. The mix made, Nina says, for the occasionally bewildering family gathering: notably Christmas dinners, at which her mother, a literary translator, functioned as a kind of switchboard between the members of her polyglot (but not, as it were, omniglot) family. The vagaries of translation and mistranslation have long been familiar to the artist, and not only in terms of language itself.

So far so cosmopolitan, but Katchadourian is not so much interested in ordinary diversity (nor cultural difference as such) than in the troublesome proximity, the "tiny but unbridgeable gap" between the voices, bodies and minds of the closest family members. There is, she says, "a strange feeling of accident around being related". Noticing





posters in New York advertising 'accent elimination' – the erasure of immigrant cadences in the name of social and professional assimilation – she thought the term at once alluring and sinister. In her six-screen video piece *Accent Elimination* (2005), she records the ludicrously convoluted processes by which her parents were trained out of their accents and into hers: the sort of educated, travelled accent that to American ears may sound like no accent at all. In turn, Katchadourian tried to learn the intonations of each of her parents' accents. The result is funny and painful: all three strain to mimic voices they have been hearing for years (in the daughter's case, all her life), and still they fail. Katchadourian's father, exasperated, notes that his daughter is getting his accent right, but still something is missing.

Accent Elimination is in some ways a keynote work for Katchadourian: it's the intimate distance between the three individuals that makes it so complex and so affecting. This is exactly the quality she discovers in other kinds of kinship structure: family resemblance is both absolutely necessary and strangely coincidental, even implausible or fantastic. Such is the absurd logic that governs structures we prefer to think of as organic or integral, that it seems even the most abstract affinities can constitute a family group, a dynasty or an ecosystem. In *Genealogy of the Supermarket* (2005), for example, Katchadourian framed 78 portraits, each taken from the packaging of an everyday commodity, on a plush red flock-wallpaper background. Linking them in a hierarchical structure, she posited a vast family tree that included Uncle Ben, Paul Newman and the Jolly Green Giant. Unlikely siblings and less likely spouses grin at the viewer in garish hues, oblivious to their crossing of national, racial, religious and historical borders: a veritable *Family of Man* that would fit in one shopping basket.

"I used to have an artist's statement", says Katchadourian, "that said 'I collect, dissect, translate, mistranslate', and so on." The processes, in other words, precede the diverse media in which she has worked: sound, sculpture, video and photography as well as the more evanescent projects that persist only as documentation. One of these last gives a clue to the taxonomic richness and formal lightness of much of her work. Since graduate school in the early 1990s, she has been

arranging other people's books in enigmatic piles: their titles forming laconic little prose poems or tragicomic vignettes. Thus: 'A Day at the Beach... The Bathers... Shark 1... Shark 2... Shark 3... Sudden Violence... Silence.' Or: 'How to Write... Very Bad Poetry... Keep Watching the Sky... Unlock... The Origin of the World'. The conceit seems simple, but the photographed permutations are unexpectedly mysterious, suggestive of some self-involved or literally trapped individual who can find no other way to signal his or her stories or distress but in this necessarily limited lexicon of found titles.

The sense of a language coming to us only haltingly, from beyond some debilitating divide, is everywhere in Katchadourian's work; its obverse, equally prevalent, is the sheer miracle of anything getting successfully communicated to anyone, ever. Reading and misreading are locked in a comically recursive relationship: messages are diverted from their proper destinations, but just as likely (and impossible to tell from the first) is the arrival of a voice or a text from the other side: from another species, say, or even from inanimate objects. Human speech slumps into phatic evasion, as in *Indecision on the Moon* (2001), a recording of the Apollo 11 moonwalk, with all the coherent speech removed and only unfinished sentences, 'ahs', 'ums' and static left intact. Objects in turn start up a hectic discourse that constantly verges on sense. In *Talking Popcorn* (2001), Katchadourian rigged up a popcorn machine with a computer that interpreted the patterns of its seemingly random pops as Morse code. Mostly the resulting text was wholly enigmatic – 'tttayeaeihe hltpwelbcrhg dttet a ki ahei hyvet eqqt i he xvonttpwda' – but at least twice the machine called her 'mom' and, alarmingly, once spelled out the word 'silence'.

In an interview with Ian Berry, published in the catalogue for Katchadourian's 2006 show at the Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, she comments: 'I think that there is an incredibly creative act inherent in mistranslation. It is a moment when you are expansively and creatively interpreting something. It may end up completely wrong, but there can be an immense amount of imagination involved when you don't completely understand something.' It's this moment of being forced to adapt one's language to a new and only partially understood reality



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